Introduction

“Jesus Christ is the face of the Father’s mercy. These words might well sum up the mystery of the Christian faith. Mercy has become living and visible in Jesus of Nazareth, reaching its culmination in him.” With these words Pope Francis begins his “Bull of Indiction,” the decree by which he proclaims the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy which we have just begun.

Appropriately enough, we set out on this Jubilee of Mercy precisely at this time of the year, when we prepare to celebrate the moment in which God’s mercy took on a human face, the face of Jesus of Nazareth, in the mystery of the Incarnation. And the ceremony which marks the beginning of this Holy Year is the opening of a door: in union with dioceses all throughout the world, here in our Cathedral we have opened a Holy Door of Mercy. This is our response to the directive of our Holy Father, who says:

… in every local church, at the cathedral – the mother church of the faithful in any particular area – … a Door of Mercy will be opened for the duration of the Holy Year…. Every Particular Church, therefore, will be directly involved in living out this Holy Year as an extraordinary moment of grace and spiritual renewal. Thus the Jubilee will be celebrated both in Rome and in the Particular Churches as a visible sign of the Church’s universal communion.

The Door of Mercy

Let us reflect for a moment on the idea of a door. What, really, is a door, what is its purpose? A door lets in and lets out: it allows one to gain access to shelter, but also to go outdoors while still being able to return to safety inside. A door also keeps out: one returns back to safety, where one is protected from the elements as well as from those who would do us harm, who remain locked outside and kept safely away.

When we consider the whole movement of God’s creation and plan of salvation, we see that we were the ones left outside: due to the fall of our first parents – the primordial disobedience of the human race to God, our collective rejection of God’s will – we have been locked out, cast out of paradise with the door securely closed and locked behind us. But Christ came to reopen that door for us, so that we can regain access to paradise, come in from the dark and the cold – the dark and cold of sin and all of its gloomy consequences – and gain the protection of God’s grace from all of those harmful elements. Yes, the door is open, but, how do we find our way there? It is so easy to get lost, distracted, or just simply get stuck where we are at, bound by the
inertia of the forces of life all around us.

During Advent, the Church at times presents to us the image of going out to meet Christ with our lamps burning brightly, an allusion to the parable of the ten virgins in Matthew 25: the five wise ones who brought oil for their lamps, and the five foolish who did not. When the word went out in the middle of the night that the bridegroom was coming, the foolish ones went off to buy oil for their lamps, but in the meantime the bridegroom arrived and “those who were ready went into the wedding feast with him” and “[t]hen the door was locked.” When the foolish ones arrived late with the oil for their lamps they had purchased, it was too late: they were left locked outside in the dark.

The Church gives us this season of Advent to remind us of the Lord’s warning to us to be always vigilant, aware of his presence among us, his coming into our lives. It is a reminder to us that we do not have to be like the foolish virgins, left out in dark with the door shut tight behind us; the Church shows us the way to that open door of God’s Kingdom.

**Indulgence**

As with every Jubilee Year in the history of the Church, so this year will present to us the opportunity to gain the indulgence of God’s mercy, that is to say, the help of God’s grace to move us to perfection. While God forgives our sins in the sacrament of Reconciliation and Penance, the debilitating effects of sin remain in us, as does the punishment due to our transgressions. As Pope Francis says:

> Though we feel the transforming power of grace, we also feel the effects of sin typical of our fallen state…. But the mercy of God is stronger even than this. It becomes indulgence on the part of the Father who, through the Bride of Christ, his Church, reaches the pardoned sinner and frees him from every residue left by the consequences of sin, enabling him to act with charity, to grow in love rather than to fall back into sin.

This is why Pope Francis has declared that in every diocese throughout the world the cathedral church – and possibly other revered sites – are to have a designated Holy Door through which the faithful may pass in order to obtain the Holy Year indulgence, under the usual conditions. This is the pious act by which we seek God’s favor by paying the debt of the temporal punishment due to our sins that have already been forgiven, the way in which we live out our baptismal call to die with Christ by dying to sin, so that we may rise to the new life of ever greater perfection in him. And so the Church provides that those faithful who participate in such a pious act, along with availing themselves of sacramental confession and absolution, the reception of Holy Communion and praying for the intentions of the Holy Father, while remaining free from all attachment to sin, including venial sin, may gain this favor from God. Here in the Archdiocese of San Francisco, in addition to our Cathedral, Holy Doors will also be dedicated at Mission San Raphael and at St. Patrick’s Seminary in Menlo Park, in order
to assist the faithful throughout the three counties of our local church in obtaining the indulgence during this Jubilee Year of Mercy. Through a special concession, Pope Francis has also granted to bishops the privilege of giving an Apostolic Blessing with a plenary indulgence at the opening of the Holy Door of Mercy, which I will impart at the conclusion of this Vespers service.

Such indulgence brings us the joy of the Lord’s nearness. The Church reminds us of this truth in a particular way on this Third Sunday of Advent, called “Gaudete Sunday” – “rejoice in the Lord” – a title which comes from the Entrance Chant for this Sunday's Mass, taken from St. Paul’s Letter to the Philippians. It is also the reading we hear tonight at Vespers as at every Sunday Vespers throughout the season of Advent, and which we hear as well in the Second Reading at today’s Mass. Apparently, the Church wants to drill this message into us! St. Paul urges us to rejoice always, for the Lord is near. We become attuned to this nearness of the Lord by growing in the way of perfection in Him, availing ourselves of the abundance of His mercy, made all the more accessible to us during the Jubilee Year of Mercy.

Conclusion

Let us allow the Holy Doors we designate in our Archdiocese, then, to serve their true purpose: a symbol of the open door to paradise, God’s Kingdom, to which God gives us access through the death of His Son; a reminder that God's mercy triumphs over judgment if we but open our minds and hearts to the grace He wishes to lavish upon us. God indulges us by drawing from the treasury of the merits of Jesus Christ and of our Blessed Mother and all the saints in whom Jesus has multiplied his merits, opening to us the door of authentic joy in Him, for He is always near. We know this from the saints who have gone before us, and this Holy Year is meant to bind us ever more closely in communion with them, the Communion of the Saints.

As we embark upon this Jubilee Year of Mercy, then, let us take as our inspiration and keep as our guiding principle the consoling teaching about the saints that Pope Francis leaves us with:

Their holiness comes to the aid of our weakness in a way that enables the Church, with her maternal prayers and her way of life, to fortify the weakness of some with the strength of others. Hence, to live the indulgence of the Holy Year means to approach the Father’s mercy with the certainty that his forgiveness extends to the entire life of the believer. To gain an indulgence is to experience the holiness of the Church, who bestows upon all the fruits of Christ's redemption, so that God’s love and forgiveness may extend everywhere. Let us live this Jubilee intensely, begging the Father to forgive our sins and to bathe us in his merciful ‘indulgence.’